

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**LITERACY WARS — HOW SHOULD READING AND WRITING BE
TAUGHT?**

**TRANSCRIPT OF PUBLIC FORUM HELD
AT PERTH
THURSDAY, 6 AUGUST 2009**

Members

Ms A.J.G. MacTiernan (Chairman)

Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)

Mr I.M. Britza

Mr A.P. O’Gorman

Mr T.G. Stephens

Public forum commenced at 6.00 pm

The CHAIRMAN: I wish to welcome all of you to Parliament House tonight. The Community Development and Justice Committee of the Legislative Assembly is very pleased to host you tonight and to discuss this incredibly important issue. Comments have been made that it is important to signify the importance of this issue by running this forum in the people's house, the house of decision making in our community.

I will start by introducing the committee members: Ian Britza, the member for Morley; Tony O'Gorman, the member for Joondalup; Tom Stephens, the member for Pilbara; and Albert Jacob, the member for Ocean Reef, the Deputy Chair. I will explain why we are here tonight. We started off an investigation looking at the level of developmental vulnerability in many of our children that was showing up in things such as the Australian early development index. We were deeply concerned about those levels of vulnerability. We started an inquiry to look at whether we were adequately meeting the needs of children aged zero to four. That has been the focus of the inquiry. We have done a lot of work and got an understanding of what we may need to do in relation to that.

During the inquiry we also came upon a related issue, that is, the way we are teaching our students once they present at school. Are the teaching styles that we are adopting affecting the outcome? Do we have a situation where the style of teaching may be disadvantaging some groups of students? Is that style of teaching disadvantaging children who come from environments that are not language rich, children from Indigenous backgrounds or children from non-English speaking backgrounds? We heard very interesting and compelling evidence on this topic that we thought that it was not only important for us to explore this more broadly, but also to foster the community debate. We are very deeply of the view that nothing can be more important than ensuring that we give all our children an opportunity for a place in the sun.

I apologise if we have offended anyone with the use of the words "literacy wars" in our advertisement. We wanted to try to break through the information overload with something a little dramatic to get people aware of what we were saying. I hope that no offence was taken at that but it was an attempt to draw a bit of attention. Judging by the number of people present tonight, we have succeeded.

We will commence with a series of short presentations. I will introduce each speaker in turn and then I will seek comments and questions from the floor. First, it is my pleasure to introduce Sharyn O'Neil. Sharyn is the Director General of the Department of Education and Training. Sharyn is representing the Minister for Education tonight. The minister extends her apologies. She was unable to attend at the last minute, so Sharyn has agreed to address the forum on her behalf.

Ms Sharyn O'Neill: I am representing the minister this evening. She would have liked to have been here but was unable to. I have some comments to make on her behalf.

The state government is committed to the provision of high-quality literacy education for all students in all schools. We know that strong literacy skills are fundamental to success in learning at all stages of education, so the government has a very clear focus on raising standards in literacy and numeracy for all students. The government has commenced the implementation of a suite of initiatives—many of you will be familiar with those—that do and will provide assistance and resources to schools and educators alike in the teaching of literacy and numeracy. These initiatives range from some pilot programs that we have in place—David Axworthy, representing the department, might make comment about those later—to system-wide changes. They target different levels of the school, including classroom teachers, principals, the school leadership in terms of whole school approaches and parents themselves. The new initiatives complement existing

strategies and incorporate the key findings. You may recall Professor Loudén's 2006 report on literacy and numeracy. The initiatives build on the learning of that.

The minister wanted to comment on the fact that while many of our students are achieving well and making good progress, significant disparities remain across schools, in particular, amongst groups of students. This is of deep concern, as has already been mentioned. No single strategy can improve the literacy and numeracy skills of all students overnight. However, the minister, the government and the department think it is essential that we act decisively to address this issue. Earlier this year the government established the Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning, which recognises that early childhood development and learning is a critical component of student achievement; in fact, it is the building block of learning in all years. The immediate priorities for that office are around better coordination and a focus on policy but, in particular, it will focus on zero to 8 curriculum and pedagogy to lead Western Australia's development in this area.

The next stage of the government's strategy will focus on early assessment and intervention to ensure that children entering year 1 have the pre-requisites for literacy and numeracy so we are embarking on entry screening. As many of you would be aware, we have national partnerships for literacy and numeracy that come out of COAG. They will provide us with significant opportunities to implement evidence-based interventions in various schools, so not necessarily driven from the central office, which some people will be happy about. These complement and strengthen the state's already considerable investment.

The minister is looking forward to receiving the findings of this inquiry. They will assist us to continue our efforts to ensure that all students are prepared in the very best way for their future success and for their future learning. On behalf of the minister, thank you for this opportunity.

The CHAIRMAN: The next speaker is the official representative of the Department of Education and Training, Mr David Axworthy, Executive Director, School Support Programs.

Mr David Axworthy: Good evening, everyone. Thank you very much for inviting me here tonight to talk about this topic that is very dear to the hearts of all the teachers in this state and all the people in this room. I would like to thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to talk about this issue. Both the previous speakers paid attention to the symbolic nature of being in this august room to talk about something that is so important to us and to the future of our state.

I will keep my remarks fairly short initially because the purpose of this forum is for us to have a dialogue. I will cut a couple of minutes off my speech and leave plenty of time for the real experts such as Lee Musumeci and other teachers to talk and to ask questions of us about the practical implications. When talking about the teaching of literacy and numeracy, it is so easy to stay at a level of generality that does not get down to the level of the child. It is important that we do.

Before I do that, I cannot resist the opportunity to talk about the advert that I saw in the paper that referred to "literacy wars". Anyone could be forgiven for thinking that there must be some major battle or disagreement going on between people about how to teach literacy, reading and writing. I do not believe that there is a great deal of disagreement amongst people about the teaching of literacy and numeracy. When we look at the research, the evidence and the major reports, whether they come from the UK, the USA or Australia—I am only talking about English-speaking countries—and, indeed, the reports that have come out of Western Australia, they say the same sorts of things. Let me quote the Rowe report of the national inquiry into the teaching of literacy. It said that an evidence-based approach is recommended that includes the systematic and explicit teaching of phonics and an approach to the teaching of reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency and comprehension. Those are the fundamental platforms on which we need to build our teaching program and our development of literacy, whether it be reading or writing. It is on those basic tenets that we as a department have established our programs, our guidelines, our resources and our professional development of teachers. Let me say them again: systemic and explicit teaching of phonics and an approach to teaching reading that

supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency and comprehension. If there is a war that we are engaged in, it is the battle to engage all our children in developing those basic skills and approaches because without them they will not be able to take their part in society.

Tonight I would like to suck up to some people because I would really like to publicly acknowledge the phenomenal job that teachers in this state do. Whether they are employed by the Department of Education and Training, Catholic education or the independent school sector, they do a phenomenal job. Their efforts are often not recognised and they do not always work under the best of circumstances. By that, I mean that not every parent or every community recognises the worth or value of education, nor indeed, of reading and writing. That is strange for some of us here to appreciate but it does not always happen for our teachers. Yet on a day-to-day basis, they go in and do the job to the best of their ability.

If we look at the results in national tests of literacy and numeracy in WA, two things stand out as far as I can see. Again, I am talking across all the sectors, not just about department schools. The first is that about 90 per cent of the population achieve reasonably well above the standards. However, in certain regions and in certain schools, as many as 50 or 60 per cent of children are not thriving and are not developing these basic literacy and numeracy skills. This is not something that is spread evenly; there are pockets of great concern. I do not believe it is any coincidence that we find similar figures when we look at school attendance. The average school attendance rate in this state is about 91 per cent. I am not saying that the other 10 per cent are truanting; they may be sick or ill or they may have other problems. Across the state, about 25 per cent of our student population is attending insufficiently to benefit from their school program fully. In other words, about 25 per cent of our population attend school sporadically and cannot benefit, regardless of the program that they are being taught. It is very difficult to see how any child can benefit from a program that is being delivered when they are not actually there. This is one of the issues that teachers have to deal with on a daily basis. As we know from evidence and research, when we are learning a new skill, whether it is reading or writing, we need to practice and we need to practice regularly. The child who misses at the very beginning and who is not there all the time creates additional strain and additional stress and will not flourish or blossom, regardless of the program that is being taught.

Let me turn to the department's approach. As I said earlier, the experts agree about what is needed in the various reports that they have written. It is no surprise, therefore, that as a department we have expressed those very words that I read earlier in our policy statements, in our syllabus statements, in our guidelines and in our documentation. Because we offer schooling from kindergarten to pre-primary before we go into the compulsory years of year 1, at the very first onset of our contact with students we have an obligation to focus on the development of oral language in particular in those early years and the development of phonemic awareness. We can come back to what that means. I do not wish to get too technical now; we will get into that as the evening wears on. It is essential that we do that, regardless of whether the child has come to school with a high level of oral language because they have come from a home background in which oral language is valued and children have high vocabularies and high oral language skills or whether they have come from a home where they possibly have not experienced a rich oral background. Regardless of where they come from, the teacher has to intervene. The attempt in kindergarten and pre-primary is to build. Our approach, very clearly, is to start with phonemic awareness and development of oral language but that in and of itself is insufficient to create fluent, sustainable, literate people. We need to address the other areas that I mentioned earlier—grammar, reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. There is very little point being able to bark at print; we need to know what it says. That is the point of writing things down, so it can convey meaning to people. If we cannot read it in the first place, we will not get any meaning from it. I understand that.

I will conclude now and give the other speakers time to talk, in particular, Lee Musumeci, about the classroom practitioner's point of view, and I will engage in the conversation later.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, David. You are absolutely right about the larger social problems of school attendance but one might argue that if children felt more at home in the classroom and they were achieving more, we might improve those attendance figures. All of these things are highly inter-related.

Our next speaker is Ms Mandy Nayton, the Chief Executive Officer of Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation, WA Literacy and Clinical Services. Mandy is doing a joint presentation with Dr Steve Heath from UWA.

Ms Mandy Nayton: It is an honour to be here and to be a part of this forum. Literacy is something I am immersed in on a daily basis, seven days a week, 365 days of the year. It is an area that I am always happy to talk about. I probably bore people to tears some of the time, but never mind. I would like to start from the other end. I agree with David in many ways. Everybody acknowledges the extraordinary efforts that teachers make. He said that 90 per cent of our kids are getting there. Although they are getting that minimum standard, I am not sure that that is good enough in terms of where we want kids to be arriving by the end of their schooling. The Australian Bureau of Statistics survey of literacy in 2006 found that 52 per cent of Australians aged 15 to 19 had a literacy level that was insufficient to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in our current society. Fifty-two per cent is a big number of 15 to 19-year-olds who do not have sufficient literacy standards. Compared with 1996 data, this indicated that these literacy levels have fallen in that 10-year period. The University of Western Australia's recent inquiry into its graduates, and employers' responses to them, found that the single biggest complaint from employers employing students from UWA was their literacy standards. This is from what would be considered one of our premier educational institutions. If we are starting at the other end, we are saying that maybe we should be recognising that there are some issues with students coming through. We receive thousands of calls a year from parents and teachers who are concerned about literacy. This is clearly a major issue for a lot of people.

We get a lot of inquiries from secondary school teachers. We have been involved with the individual assessments of year 8s coming into some schools and have found that up to a third of incoming year 8s have reading ages of eight years or below. That is a lot of kids who will not be able to engage in a secondary school curriculum. They will certainly not be keen to attend school, they will certainly not access a secondary school curriculum and they will not be able to demonstrate their skills and knowledge around that curriculum.

Concerns are raised by upper primary teachers about students coming through from middle primary. Middle primary teachers raise concerns about students coming from junior primary, and so on. Literacy is a whole school concern; it is not just about the early years. I always get a bit concerned that the focus ends up being on the early childhood teachers, who feel like they are carrying the whole brunt of literacy right through to university level. It is something that starts at that point. Clearly, everybody needs to be a little more aware of what the research is saying.

As David mentioned, numerous inquiries have been conducted both here and overseas and the findings have been absolutely consistent. Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, structured synthetic phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency and reading comprehension strategies provide all children with a clear learning advantage, as does associated professional learning for teachers. That is one of the issues that we are talking about today—just how much access teachers in the classrooms across the state have had to professional learning around those five key areas. We need to recognise that in order to improve reading outcomes, we need to be including synthetic phonics instruction in the early years, which, by definition, starts with an emphasis on oral language, phonological awareness and phonemic awareness skills. In addition, students need to be taught alphabetic knowledge. There is clear evidence that students provided with these skills become more accurate and fluent readers. They develop stronger reading and comprehension skills, they read more widely and more often, they develop stronger and more robust vocabularies as a consequence

of their reading and they have a significantly greater chance of academic success. I do not think anyone would argue with what the evidence is saying. The dilemma is really how much of that is actually happening in early childhood centres.

We know that children arrive in the school setting from vastly different backgrounds and with vastly different levels of language experience and oral language competencies. First grade children from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds frequently know about twice as many words as lower SES children. Disadvantaged children who enter school with vocabulary deficiencies have a particularly difficult time learning words from context. It is vital that they be provided with a robust and explicit approach to vocabulary instruction. Weaknesses in these areas are closely linked to both reading and wider literacy failure. It is even more important that these students be provided with access to programs that include intensive early phonological and phonemic awareness, skill building, vocabulary instruction and curricula in which structured synthetic phonics and alphabetic knowledge are taught explicitly. There is a significant body of evidence both through the research and from practice demonstrating that this disadvantage can be largely overcome through the introduction of a structured early childhood program. We know that children taught to read using structured synthetic phonics will be a year ahead of controls and national norms initially and will maintain or even add to this advantage over time, regardless of SES background. That has been reported in a number of studies and by various people, such as Johnston and Watson, McCardle and Chhabra, and so on.

Prevention is obviously better than cure. We know that students who are struggling to read in year 1 have a 90 per cent chance of continuing to struggle throughout their schooling. We also know through research and evidence that when the results of early screening of phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge and language skills are used to inform intervention programs, literacy outcomes improve significantly. This needs to be coupled with training for teachers in effective phonological awareness and phonics instruction. Again, the findings from both here and overseas show that this is irrespective of SES background and it reinforces that this early disadvantage does not have to mean reading failure. The Catch Them Before They Fall project involving primary schools across WA, which was run by UWA's Child Study Centre and overseen by Dr Steve Heath, demonstrated this exceptionally well. One of the best performing schools at the conclusion of the trial was a school from one of the lowest SES areas.

I turn to the current levels of teacher training in Western Australia. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s most, if not all, pre-service teacher training courses included absolutely no information on phonological awareness, phonics and evidence-based reading instruction. At the time of the national literacy inquiry in 2005 it was found that of the 34 training institutions across Australia, the majority spent less than five per cent of teaching time on the acquisition of reading, and this was primarily whole language based. To be fair, teachers and, therefore teaching courses, are being asked to cram more and more into an already overcrowded curriculum. Given the recommendations made at both the state and federal level, it appears that university courses now include some aspects of effective evidence-based reading instruction but in widely varying degrees. Over the past 12 months the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation has provided training in reading and spelling acquisition to teachers, either individually or in whole school professional learning sessions, representing over 300 Western Australian schools. Without exception, staff from these schools reported that their training in these areas had been inadequate and they did not feel confident enough to run a highly structured synthetic phonics program.

I want to make one quick comment about balanced reading programs because it is something that has entered the rhetoric and is used quite a lot. I am totally in favour of a balanced reading program, as most people are, but we need to be very careful that it is not simply a matter of adding a little bit of phonics to what is essentially a whole language program. This will only serve to confuse both the teachers delivering the program and the students receiving it. Current research findings suggest that all children need explicit systematic instruction in phonics and exposure to rich literature, both

fiction and non-fiction. It is important that children receive instruction in structured phonics early in their reading development so that they do not develop the compensatory strategies that so often bring them unstuck later on in their education. Attention to vocabulary growth, comprehension strategies, language development and writing are essential. The development of children's interests and pleasure in reading must be maintained as a central focus within any reading program.

[6.30 pm]

Phonics is not necessarily boring. Perhaps one of the greatest misconceptions attached to structured phonics instruction is that it is by definition too boring and too prescriptive. If phonics is taught well in a multi-sensory and engaging manner, it can be one of the most exciting and important components of early childhood education. In an independent Ofsted report "Responding to the Rose review: schools' approaches to systematic teaching of phonics" it was noted that many teachers have been surprised by the joy shown by children as they master phonic skills and how that has created a virtuous circle. Children's increasing command of the skills has led to staff's expectations being raised which in turn is improving the pace and demand of teaching, all of which lead to further success. I will finish; I know I am going over time.

When Sir Jim Rose delivered his report on the revised UK primary curriculum and the significant improvements achieved through its implementation, the children's secretary responded by saying —

We know that ensuring children are confident communicators and able to read and write well is vital to their development and progress at school. I am delighted that Sir Jim is reporting such success in our implementation of his recommendations.

...

I'm also encouraged that teachers have embraced the programme and are reporting on its successes.

He said further that it is essential that, as a result of the government's early reading policies, we are ensuring that every lesson uses phonics within the context of a broad and rich curriculum and that every child who needs something extra gets the one-to-one support they deserve. That is something we must build in to anything that we are recommending; that is, students who need support have access to the resources to get that support. The sounds and letters program that has been developed in the UK through generous but essential government funding is exceptional and ensures that teachers have access to fantastic resources. Because of the large diversity among children entering school in both their talent and their preparation for learning to read, ensuring that all children learn to read is an enormous challenge. I will require professional development for teachers, school reorganisation, careful and well-designed screening and assessment and a relentless intervention focus on the individual needs of every child. But it is not the most difficult thing we could be faced with and it certainly is worth aiming for.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much Mandy; that was excellent.

I now ask Dr Yvonne Carnellor, the coordinator of the ECE program, school of education, Curtin University of Technology.

Dr Yvonne Carnellor: We are the ones who are responsible for sending them out into the schools. Thank you everyone for being here, for participating tonight and to the committee for the invitation. Within our early childhood program, which is basically from birth through to eight—the first three years of the compulsory school years—we run three literacy units, which is minimal. But it is all we can fit in when trying to fit in all the other learning areas as well. We also incorporate and embed literacy in everything that the students do across the curriculum. So, even though we have three specific language courses or literacy courses for the students, we also have literacy embedded into every unit they do, no matter what it might be.

The three units are based on the very early years, nought to three. I was very quickly skimming through some books just before I came here this evening. It was interesting that one of the quotes I was reading was that kiddies who do not have our English background and do not hear our sounds of language in the first year of their development either never get them or take as many years to catch up with them as a regular ESL child coming into the system. That gives us a rather different perspective when we look at the children we are teaching in our schools where we are trying to develop a sound knowledge of a phonemic phonic awareness. But if they do not have those language sounds it is very difficult. So our first course is the nought to three when we concentrate very much on the early development of language and, specifically, in oral language development. I guess, if I could quote Winch et al, they say that oral language competence forms a necessary foundation for the learning of reading and writing forever.

That is our first unit of work that the students do. We look at those early language years. We try to embed it in a play-based environment, but with specific emphasis on observation of children so that our students are then able to identify very early kiddies that are having any sort of language problems and plan accordingly. The second unit we look at in their second year is four to six—our kindy, pre-primary emphasis in that unit of work. In that unit of work, again, literacy is across all the learning areas, but within that there is specific emphasis—and we give them, hopefully, the skills—on phonics, grammar and punctuation; everything that a child needs for reading and writing because we also know that reading and writing occur at the same time all through their development. It is not that writing comes down the track; their writing may be scribbles, but they are writing from the time they are tiny little people.

Looking at those areas again within that four to six, those kindy-pre-primary years, we give the students the opportunity to look at all the policies and programs from the department and from other learning institutions. We give them an opportunity to examine the screening tools that are being currently used within the schools, to go out and practise those screening tools with children in school-based experiences. From that, they are then able to develop and plan according to where that child fits into a program. So immediately we are starting to look at early intervention and how that can help.

Six to eight, the third one, is where we are really looking at the early school program. It worries me when I hear “whole language versus phonics” because that was never how whole language was written. I have known Brian Campbell, probably the guru here, for 30-odd years. I worked with him at Wollongong University. Phonics, phonemic awareness, was always a central part of that curriculum. That it has been watered down and misinterpreted has caused it to be eliminated or forgotten in the pathway of it. Whole language—yes, important because that embeds language across everything that a child does. But within that phonics, that graphophonics, that knowledge of how our language forms and what these letters say and how they work, is an integral part of whole language. As far as I am concerned, and in the courses we prepare for our students, it is not whole language versus phonics; it is: how does phonics fit into this big picture of whole language? The same with direct instruction and play-based. No. There is no difference between them. We use direct instruction if it is observed that that child needs it, so that we are trained to train the students to work with whole class, small groups, individuals and, from careful observation, from careful knowledge from all the background knowledge of research and understanding that we, hopefully, are giving them, they can attack those problems. But no, not versus, but incorporated in it.

The six to eight where we are looking at those early years of school, the years 1, 2, 3 is a lot more structured in the work we prepare for them and what we expect of them, where they look at different phonics programs and different instructional methods that are out there, where they also have the opportunity to develop sight words that are essential to kiddies within their environment, within the bigger environment. Research we did found that these kiddies within Western Australian in the schools we looked are using the same words that Dolch came up with in the 1960s, and there has been very little change. Those words are essential to children’s development of reading.

We do that with them; we give them sight words. Put them into your programs—the phonics instruction. As someone said, it is not boring if it is embedded in all the other activities you are doing, but not just sit for a phonics lesson. I would really argue against that. In the latest bulletin I received from England, the literacy hour has been canned because they find it is not working. We need to look at literacy throughout the child's development not as a one-off thing.

My notes are everywhere and I do apologise. Within identifying the special needs we also look at children with accelerated learning and accelerated speech. A lot of them are coming into our schools; therefore, we need to have things in place for those children. If we have these in place, we do not need behaviour management units.

Just finishing off, I have been at Curtin for five and a half years. In that time, the lecturers I have had on literacy have been people who are highly competent, highly recognised throughout your state and also recognised nationally. I think they have done a good job. I fully support them, and I will keep on fully supporting what they are doing. I would just like to end with a quote from Fraser Mustard because I think that sums up our feelings in the early childhood area. He states —

Necessary literacy levels cannot be achieved unless we substantially improve the environment for early child development. While responsibility for developing the required skills and competency falls under the mandate of the education system, how a child will function in school is largely determined before they enter school.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Yvonne. Our next speaker is Ms Lee Musumeci, the principal of Challis Early Childhood Education Centre.

Ms Lee Musumeci: Thanks Alannah for the opportunity to be here tonight. My presentation is not academic in nature. I have merely been asked to provide one perspective on the experience I have had since working at Challis Early Childhood Education Centre, which is a school in a disadvantaged area. Please excuse me for reading from my notes but I need to stick to the ten-minute time frame I have been given.

Challis Early Childhood Education Centre is one of the last, if not the last, remaining early childhood centres in the state. Our entire school consists of children from kindergarten to year 2. We share a site with Challis Primary School, which is responsible for educating the children from year 3 through to year 7. We are located in Armadale and we are a very proud government school. We currently have 305 children enrolled in our school with a very significant percentage of those children coming from a background of disadvantage. We have 18 per cent Aboriginal population, which is increasing, along with an increase in children of refugee status and non-English speaking backgrounds.

Disadvantage is a relative term so to provide a context around the level of disadvantage to which I am referring, I am referring to children who live in homes without sufficient resources to meet their needs. Not just their financial resources, but emotional, physical and spiritual resources are lacking. Many of them are brought up in abject poverty where food, electricity, phones and clean clothing may or may not be available and are very rarely available all at the same time. Many children enter school never having owned a book, visited a library or had a story ever read to them. Other demographics from our school include a high percentage of children who have experienced serious trauma; parents who are incarcerated—one or both parents may be incarcerated—parents with drug and alcohol dependency issues; single-parent families; children who have experienced neglect or abuse; and a significant number of children in foster care. Of significant concern to me is the large number of children spending significant amounts of time in child care prior to school age.

For the remainder of this presentation I will talk to you about the journey that the pre-primary section of my school has been through over the seven years I have been at the school. Lots of stuff is happening in the other areas of school but for tonight I would like to focus on pre-primary. When

I arrived at the school seven years ago, I spent the first year grappling with myriad very complex issues surrounding a school in a disadvantaged area. We worked on behaviour management—not just of children but of parents—on improving the appearance of buildings and surrounding areas and updating our resources. By the end of the first year that I was there our PIPS data; that is, performance indicators in primary schools, which measures kids' skills in reading, phonics and maths, showed that the children started behind the rest of their peers of the same age throughout Australia and finished the year further behind. So after a year of teaching the gap had widened. The following year we focused on ensuring classrooms were child-centred, developmentally appropriate, safe, warm and caring where parents and children felt comfortable and welcome. More money was spent on literacy resources and teachers engaged children in wonderful literacy activities and in stimulating incursions and excursions to support their interest in literacy. They participated in art and craft activities and cooking, and literacy centres exposed them to opportunities for speaking and listening, reading and writing. At the end of that year, our PIPS result again showed a widening gap. As a staff we decided to focus on curriculum development so that we had a consistent and systematic approach from kindergarten to year 2. A whole-school language plan was developed that assisted teachers with what to teach. We developed an attendance strategy to improve overall attendance, which was less than acceptable at that point in time, and we spent a full year working on developing a vision for the school and statements that articulated what Challis Early Childhood Education Centre stands for. One of those statements captures the value we place on play-based learning and the importance of play in the early years of learning. At the start of 2005 our PIPS results showed that 29 per cent of our pre-primary children were starting pre-primary at the same point as their peers around Australia. Only 29 per cent were on a level playing field with the other children of their same age. The remaining 71 per cent of the children were up to 18 months behind in the area of phonics, reading and maths. Alarming, at the end of that year only 39 per cent of the Challis children finished at the same point as their peers around Australia. So after 40 weeks of teaching with wonderful resources, safe, caring welcoming classrooms, multiple language experiences and a systematic whole-school language plan, 61 per cent of our children were still not equipped with the literacy skills that they require to be effective readers. Our 2005 ADI data supported the PIPS data with 33 per cent of the children developmentally vulnerable in the language and cognitive skills domain. At the start of 2007 we followed a line of inquiry process to ask ourselves some challenging questions about our data and why it was consistently poor. I made it clear to all staff that, despite our best efforts and our best intentions, our results were not good enough and a significant change was needed in order to improve the children's literacy results. By this stage we had good attendance, effective processes for managing student behaviour, a tremendous array of resources, a vision for the school, a consistent approach to what was being taught and a decent marketing strategy to raise the profile and reputation of the school, and yet we had really poor results. So our attention turned to the strategies that were being used to develop literacy. Drawing on a wealth of research on early brain development, recommendations from the national inquiry into the teaching of literacy and professional readings on breaking the cycle of poverty, I introduced the expectation that our school would include the direct teaching of phonics in an explicit and systematic manner on a daily basis to every child as part of their language program. Remember, I am talking about pre-primary here. This included teaching sounds in a specific order, introducing sounds and then letter names, teaching children to blend sounds together to make CVC words, teaching sight words on flashcards and listening to every child read every day. Importantly, we raised our expectations of our pre-primary children as effective readers instead of expecting them not to be able to read or retain information because of their home backgrounds and their lack of prior opportunities. That year, five staff left the school. It was actually a very difficult year, with four out of five citing the reason for leaving as fundamentally disagreeing with the approach being adopted in the school as it did not line up with what they had been taught in university as the way to develop literacy in early childhood. The remaining staff were less than enthusiastic, and many healthy debates were had. It is a good thing I have a good relationship with the staff, but many

healthy debates were had over formal versus informal learning, the place of direct teaching in a pre-primary program, developmental readiness and phonics versus whole-of-language approaches. I take your point that it does not have to be either/or. Then along came a graduate teacher—a delightfully bright, bubbly and creative graduate who had spent the first three months grappling with a new class with very little idea of how to teach reading. I asked her if she would like to have a go at implementing this new strategy and she jumped at the opportunity. So we assisted her to develop a program that increased the amount of time spent on the teaching of literacy; utilised the direct teaching of sounds and the letter-sound relationship; differentiated the language skills that children were working on so that they were all working in small groups and at their level; ensured that she listened to every child read every day; taught sight words by direct instruction; and developed a take-home reading program so that children had extra practice at reading and their sight words. She implemented this program using highly motivating techniques and resources that had children making words with playdoh; using magnetic letters on white boards to spell out their sight words; dressing up in costumes to reflect the sound that was being taught; cooking food to reinforce the sound; and digging in the sandpit while chanting songs that reinforced the sounds and so on. I would like to say that the other pre-primary teachers also embraced this approach, but they did not. At the end of the year, each pre-primary teacher received their PIPS results and, not surprisingly, the graduate teacher's class had started the year with a majority of the children behind the rest of their peers and by the end of the year not only had she closed the gap, but in the majority of individual student cases, she had surpassed the group—there actually was not a gap. High quality, systematic and direct teaching had achieved very good results. The remaining classes' results were as they always had been. The gap had widened and, indeed, some children had flat-lined; they had not shown any progress despite being part of the language program for 40 weeks of the school year.

I will fast-forward to this year. With reluctance, the remaining pre-primary teachers agreed to trial the direct teaching of phonics on a daily basis and introduce sight words and follow the program that the graduate had implemented. Their reluctance came from a fundamental opposition to this direct informal approach being utilised in a pre-primary setting and also from a fear that they did not know how to actually teach reading. Their training had prepared them for setting up learning environments with literacy centres and a home corner where they facilitated play and ensured participation of all students. They encouraged, modelled and supported play and immersed children in rich language experiences, but they did not know how to systematically teach reading. Through professional learning, modelling by the graduate teacher, significant in-class support by the deputy principal, more exposure to the research and, I have to admit, ongoing pressure from admin, all pre-primary teachers now implement a structured explicit and direct-language program.

Throughout term 2 we reviewed our mid-year data, which showed that across the pre-primary classes children are already demonstrating skills that we have rarely seen, even by the end of the year. All children, except two in one class, know all of their sounds. Most are blending CVC words; most are on level 1 reading recovery readers, for those of you who are familiar with reading recovery, with many at level 5 or above; all are in the habit of reading at home and practising their sight words; and all are having a go at writing. Most importantly, the children are proud and excited at being able to read and they are motivated to progress to the next level. They think they can read and so they do read.

To summarise: children from backgrounds of disadvantage have not had the quality stimulation required to switch on their neurons and develop strong brain architecture. They arrive at school with limited language, lots of disconnected ideas and brain pathways that are unsophisticated and fragile. They do not learn through osmosis or by solely being immersed in language experiences. Teachers need to explicitly teach letter-sound relationships and make the connections for them. From my perspective, we need to increase the academic rigour in our kindergarten and pre-primary schools; have higher expectations of children in these crucial years of learning; spend more time teaching, not less; and ensure the systematic and direct teaching of phonics. Crucially, universities have a

vital role to play in better preparing teachers in what and how to teach reading, particularly in early childhood. We are still committed to play-based learning and we place high importance on the value of play. Our classrooms are exciting places to be a part of; however, our vision has been rewritten to include play-based learning through the direct teaching of skills. This is what I have learnt from my experience at Challis and I am firmly convinced that this is the way we will make a significant difference to the reading outcomes for our children.

Thank you for allowing me to share our story with you.

[Applause.]

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Lee. I think we can speak for all the committee to say we are so pleased we have such dedicated professionals in our schools—people who are determined to do whatever it takes to make that difference. I want to thank all the speakers for their presentations tonight.

I do apologise to the people upstairs. We have someone collecting questions from upstairs. We will spend the first 15 or 10 minutes taking questions down here and someone will bring down those questions or comments from upstairs. There are a few places down here. If anyone is burning to make a comment they should make themselves known and they can take a seat down here.

Who would like to make a comment or ask a question of one of our panellists?

Ms Janine Wishart: I work at Curtin University and have had a long career with the education department until the beginning of this year. A lot of my readings and work have been in the area of literacy. I would like to ask David and Sharon: what is the likelihood of Western Australia following the USA's track of "No child left behind policy" of having policies that are enforced and attached to funding? Is that going to happen or is it going to be much more contextualised in getting a standard approach across?

Ms Sharyn O'Neill: Your question really is: are we going to have a policy like the US policy? There are various ways to answer that question but where I will start is that I certainly have been very explicit in the direction I have given to the department that our expectation is that every child is a successful one, which is the same as "there will be no child left behind". I think I have been very up-front about that. I have made no apology for directing explicit teaching of the way Lee has talked about. Certainly in our publications this year we made no apology for saying to our schools, "We expect you to teach explicitly the essential skills that children need now and later to be successful". In that regard, that by-line of "no child left behind" is no different from the one I use about every child being a successful one, every public school being a good one and every public school teacher being a quality one. In that regard I do not think we need to follow the US or any other country in stating that every child in Western Australia, regardless of race, background or location, ought to be able to be a successful one. My Catholic and independent school colleagues would say the same, I am sure, and I know they do.

In terms of funding being attached to that, I guess this year, this new government made statements and additional funding commitments of—I do not remember the quantum off the top of my head—certainly an additional \$2 million, for example, to one entry testing. For the first time we gave to public school teachers explicit teaching resources around grammar, spelling and essential literacy and numeracy skills. For a long time, as a department, based on philosophical positions and beliefs, I guess, we did not think that was the right thing or necessary to do. I disagree with that. I think teachers have been crying out for explicit guidance about what to teach and explicit resources to help them do that and to achieve the kind of results that I think Lee's leadership and of her team are showing us.

My answer to the question is: I do not think we need to follow the US's lead in this regard. In fact, its results generally are not as good as those regarded in Australia. Nonetheless, the US's underlying theme and policy that every single child, indigenous low SES or otherwise, will be

granted the same opportunity and expectation. Sometimes I think it is as much about expectation as it is about other things. I think Western Australia is well positioned to say—this department particularly has made some changes I think fairly recently—one child left behind is not good enough regardless of where they come from. We have tried to put our direction, our money and our energy behind that to give very explicit direction about how that should be done, including the teaching of phonics, explicit teaching and direct instruction, not just for those who are falling behind. In my view, every child ought to be directly instructed in those things that matter, and that is literacy and numeracy.

[7.00 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Sharyn. I suspect that everyone wants every child to do well. I do not think that anyone would say we do not want children to do well. We need to talk about how we get to that point. There is no lack of desire to do that, but if we are failing, how do we deal with that? I have a question from Gail Byrne of the dyslexic centre. The question is directed at Dr Yvonne Carnellor, but anyone can answer it. Why is it that teachers are not being trained to assess children with learning differences? Ms Byrne says that her daughter is dyslexic and that in year 9 at high school she continually failed to get adequate assistance. Ms Byrne feels that her daughter's teachers need to understand her learning differences. Perhaps other participants might be able to contribute to that answer. When Dr Carnellor has provided an answer, I will ask Dr Steve Heath to explain whether dyslexia is related to the phonics versus whole-language teaching. Are teachers being trained to assess those children that have learning difficulties?

Dr Yvonne Carnellor: We are training them to the best of our ability. Learning difficulties is a huge area, and literacy learning difficulties is probably the biggest of those huge areas. We are trying to establish those learning difficulties but it is very difficult to do that at the moment. I have just done some mini-research, and at our last meeting it was said that there was an "epidemic"—I think that was the phrase—of speech pathology in our schools. Recently I looked at more than 200 pre-primary children who live in our leafy green areas right down to those who are from the areas that Lee described. The number of pre-primary children who have been assessed as having oral language difficulties—whether it be a speech difficulty or a language difficulty—is huge. If they cannot get access to help before then, we will have problems in our schools because it is very difficult to make up for those areas later on.

I stand to be corrected, but I believe that it has always been very difficult to establish with absolute certainty whether a child is dyslexic or has a language delay or a developmental disability. Hopefully the tools that the teachers use will enable them to identify those children. However, we have the teachers for just three units. We try to teach language across the curriculum, but it is very difficult for the universities to do any better than we are doing. We need ongoing development in this area so that we can give the teachers the basics and the ground rules, but they need a whole lot more personal development to be able to look for disabilities and ascertain exactly what the problem is: whether it is a delay, a disability or something else within the brain that we are unable to pinpoint. There are many criteria and underlying matters that we must look at. Perhaps Dr Steve Heath could add more to that answer.

Dr Steve Heath: I believe that we can be much more specific about dyslexia these days. Traditionally, we have said that dyslexia was a surprising failure to successfully develop literacy skills. That implied that there was a discrepancy between a child's potential and opportunity to learn, and the child's achievement in literacy. That definition has continued to be used, even though since the mid-1980s we have begun to be aware that a core deficit that leads to this problem is the failure to develop phonological processing normally, and particularly to develop phonemic awareness—the ability to process the sounds of speech, which is thought to happen in the temporal lobes. We are in a much better position today than we were previously to assess children for a literacy disorder, or whatever we want to call it—"dyslexia" is the term that is most often used.

Our research at UWA and at other universities throughout the world is showing that we can measure the potential phonological awareness of pre-primary children. A number of other variables can also be taken into account that allow us to predict with 86 per cent or more accuracy those children who will be failing at literacy on multiple measures by the end of year 2. We have repeated that study three times with the support of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training and we keep getting the same results. A lot of evidence from overseas suggests that a very strong familial effect is involved in literacy failure. We have a very vulnerable group of children who will need additional and intensive support to successfully develop literacy skills. Most people around the world agree that we should expect, at the very most, about five per cent of children to fail at literacy because they have an impairment in the speech processing—the phonological processing—areas. However, we have a much higher rate of literacy failure than that. It is very important for us to think about how to effectively teach children literacy at an early age so that we do not end up with a lot of children in pre-primary who sit at the bottom quartile of children. When we measure the phonological processing of the bottom quartile of children in pre-primary and follow them up, our data suggests that around seven out of 10 of those children will be functionally very weak—that is, below the sixteenth percentile. Only 16 per cent of children, at the very most, should be in that category yet we have 25 per cent or more in that category. Those children are very vulnerable and need the kind of pedagogy that Mandy Nayton has been highlighting and that Lee Musumeci has said is being put into practice. It is very important to not just ascribe literacy failure to children having a predisposition to dyslexia. We need to think more broadly than that.

The CHAIRMAN: A couple of young people in the public gallery have dyslexia. Is it possible for them to be given greater assistance? Is there hope for them?

Dr Steve Heath: As I have mentioned, we can identify them early. The research that has been supported by the Department of Education and Training is already showing the same sorts of results that Lee has mentioned and that Mandy has referred to. If children in low socioeconomic areas and advantaged areas are given structured synthetic phonic education and are taught the other linguistic components that we have spoken about—I was very gratified to hear David Axworthy say that that is policy now—we can develop those children who are vulnerable so that we will not need to put up with the very high literacy failure rate; we need only have a very small percentage of about five per cent. Fortunately, inclusive schooling these days allows learning adjustments for the children who are the hardest to help. They can be given special accommodation when they sit a test or exam, and they can access a wide range of electronic support. Although being unable to read or write was a huge disadvantage when some of us went to school, it does not have to be that way nowadays. I say to the young people in the public gallery that if someone is advocating for them and they are given appropriate conditions in which to study, they should be able to access the whole curriculum and demonstrate their learning outcomes in ways that will not disadvantage them because of their dyslexia.

I want to broaden the debate a little. I will take the plunge! It seems to me that there is an elephant in the room. It is wonderful to hear that the Department of Education and Training now has, as its policy, a very solid platform based on the evidence that we have seen from all over the world, but there is a lag. I have taught teachers, done professional development and talked to parents who are tearing out their hair because of their children's lack of progress. I have talked also to providers of literacy services and school psychologists, and have assessed literally hundreds of children with learning difficulties at the UWA Child Study Centre Learning Clinic. When Bill Lowden conducted an inquiry into Western Australian literacy and numeracy, he said, "We know what to do; we are not doing it". I know that there are many well-meaning teachers. In certain pockets we are able to get it together and do the sorts of things that Lee has told us about, but we still have a huge lag. I am really concerned that we do not have pre-service training to bring our teachers up to speed. I was trained during the 1960s. I did not know about any of this stuff then because it did not exist. It was just lucky that I was able to make the change and begin to understand these kinds of new

developments. We need to provide pre-service training to teachers. I heard what Yvonne said. However, many teachers are telling Mandy, other people and I that they do not know how to present the evidence-based literacy instruction that we are saying is policy. Alannah has said that she wants us to talk about what we can do to change things. We need to talk about this. We need to bring it out in the open and admit that many teachers do not know how to deliver evidence-based, effective literacy education. They are very well meaning and very professional people, but they are not yet equipped with the knowledge to do that.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you, very much. I will come back to the members on the floor after I have asked a question from an educator who is in the public gallery that picks up on that issue. This question is directed to you, David. What is the Department of Education and Training doing to address the lack of knowledge and expertise about the training of early literacy skills? I will ask you to weave into your answer a comment about Lee's experience of resistance by the teachers to teach this, particularly in the pre-primary years, because it seemed to run counter to the way that they had been trained. If the Department of Education and Training has a phonics approach, do you see the problem that the educator has acknowledged in his question? We have heard from Lee that the teachers are not comfortable teaching it.

Mr David Axworthy: Thank you. I take Dr Steve Heath's point that a lag occurs whenever something new is implemented. I also make the point that the first thing we need to do if we are to move forward is be very clear about what we want to happen and to say that as clearly, explicitly and directly as we can. We then need to build a set of resources and materials for people. We need to give people permission to do what they want to do and what they can do for those who can do it. We provide resources and materials to the vast majority of people who can pick them up and start to run with it, and then we start to bring along the others that may be resistant because of a philosophical ideal or because they have not come to terms with the new materials. In this instance we have produced a vast array of material in the past 12 months. We have done that because two or three years ago we engaged with university academics such as Dr Steve Heath and Bill Lowden, who came into our schools and told us what was going on and advised us. The Department of Education and Training must take an educational approach to things and we must be open to learning ourselves. I am not in the least bit fearful of the data from the research that is coming back to us because we actually asked for and commissioned it. We are now turning it into a raft of measures. Yes, we have some policy; yes, it is in-built into our syllabus materials and resources; and yes, it is available for online curriculum development and online professional development. The big issue for the department, which has a workforce of something like 30 000 teachers, is to give each teacher the face-to-face training and teaching that this requires. That takes a lot of time and it takes teachers out of the classroom. We do not necessarily have a backup teacher to go into a classroom when a teacher is being trained. It is complex, but we have started and we are moving forward. The national partnership between the commonwealth government and the state government, which the director general mentioned earlier, will release a lot of money into this state. One of those partnerships will look specifically at developing literacy and numeracy. We cannot work with everyone all at once, so it will be staged. In the first instance, the department will look at those areas where currently the performance is not successful. Sharyn talked about no child being left behind. In fact, those areas where possibly even the majority of children are not successful will be the first cab off the rank when working with the teachers and the schools to put in place the support and the professional development teaching that is necessary to undertake what we have said is policy. The easy bit is writing the policy. The rhetoric is easy but getting the practice to follow the rhetoric and staying true to the course and not changing every 10 minutes is problematic. That is where we are at and where we are headed.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there a role for the Department of Education and Training to prescribe standards for graduates, either by working cooperatively with the universities or, alternatively, by setting the department's own standards?

Mr David Axworthy: When you talk about standards for the graduates, are you talking about their own literacy standards, or the standard of practice?

The CHAIRMAN: I note a recent recommendation to the Queensland government that the Department of Education and Training should intervene and set its own professional standards for education graduates who want to teach in government schools and that they be required to meet certain specified standards. The department would therefore not be reliant purely on the decisions of the academic institutions.

Mr David Axworthy: That is interesting. We have professional standards in all sorts of ways and we recognise advanced skills. We look at teacher competencies, for example. We need to look at how productive it is to use the stick approach as opposed to a carrot approach. I quite firmly believe that we must work with the current staff and raise their capacity. Sharyn may want to talk about that as a matter of policy.

Ms Sharyn O'Neill: I can inform everyone that the commonwealth government is negotiating with all the states to prescribe the qualification expectations for teachers in the early years so that they will achieve not just a general qualification, but an early-years qualification. We are also negotiating with the commonwealth government about teaching course standards. I am sure that the federal government is talking to the universities about that also. That involves the kinds of standards that the individual teachers would need to have, taking into account not only that their own literacy and numeracy skills are incredibly important, but also the kinds of standards and achievements that would need to be arrived at for the teacher graduates. That is very much on the agenda. Queensland is lining up behind that, and every other state will be committing to it in some form as well.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We will take questions or comments from the floor.

Ms Sue North: Thank you very much for the presentations. My name is Sue North and I am from the State Library of Western Australia. My question is directed at David Axworthy. David talked about the need to engage children, and I absolutely agree with that. Surely there is also a need to engage parents in their children's reading and literacy long before their children start school. Although schools and teachers should be involved in that, I do not believe that they can do it on their own. Is the department ready, willing and able to work more closely with partners within government and within the community to ensure better outcomes for our children's literacy in the future?

Mr David Axworthy: Yes, yes, and yes. Seriously! You are absolutely right. We cannot do it on our own and we should not be doing it on our own. We need to form partnerships and alliances to work together. We are more than willing to do that. I understand that Sue and I are supposed to be meeting very shortly. I think we were supposed to meet last week to talk about that but the meeting was rescheduled. A number of those types of partnerships exist in different parts of the state under local arrangements. In the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the parents of every newborn child are given a literacy pack that they carry with them to welcome them to the values of reading and education. Obviously it is a pre-literacy pack for newborns! That is just one example. We need to do that in a more systemic way.

Ms Sue North: There are children throughout Western Australia who get that type of package—about 97 per cent of them—but it has not been easy to do that at a whole-of-state level.

The CHAIRMAN: I will ask the lady down the back to come forward.

Ms Dianna Rig: My name is Dianna Rig. I would like to refer to Yvonne's comment that we are training teachers to the best of our ability. Is it not time for a cross-discipline approach? Does education need to turn to the guidance of speech pathology so that speech pathologists can guide educators about how to explicitly teach oral language? I commend Lee about the results at Challis. As an educator and speech pathologist, I argue that regardless of entry levels, all children are teachable. However, the lower the entry level, the greater the educator's knowledge base and skills

need to be. If educators do not have the answers, do they need more guidance from other disciplines?

The CHAIRMAN: Is Dianna's point that speech pathology supports the notion that —

Ms Dianna Rig: It has a part to play to provide guidance. Speech pathologists are trained explicitly in how to deal with delayed and disorder development and poor entry levels. A huge amount of their training targets that area.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think that if you had a role to play in training teachers within the academic institutions you could get a better pedagogical outcome?

Ms Dianna Rig: The answer lies in the two disciplines coming together far more than they do.

Dr Yvonne Carnellor: I could not agree with you more. Over the years that I have been in Curtin University, I have encouraged quite a lot of our early childhood students to pick up electives from speech pathology and communication. Those students also attend lectures with us, although it is minimal. I could not agree with Dianna more. It is obvious just from the children who I have looked at in the past few weeks that this is absolutely critical. If we do not establish that outcome, we will have a lot more literacy problems than we have already.

The CHAIRMAN: Ms Rig's question was whether the people developing the pedagogical styles have a direct dialogue with speech pathologists to understand how best to deal with these issues.

Dr Yvonne Carnellor: It is minimal. We cannot fit in any more than we are fitting in at the moment. The best that we can do is the cross-lectures that we have with them. Our students also do special electives with them.

The CHAIRMAN: I am talking about your staff. Do they understand these issues and incorporate them into it?

Dr Yvonne Carnellor: They certainly do but, again, it is a matter of them accessing times that fit with them to work with us and for us to work with them. However, because the timetabling is done centrally in the universities, it is difficult to manage how we can work with other people. As I said, we try our best to get them to do lectures with us. We are establishing the basis for them to do that, but it is very basic at the moment. Many of our students have picked up the electives so that the graduates, hopefully, will have the skills that we might not have as well as we could have because we were educationally trained and not speech trained, which is a very different set of skills.

Dr John Wray: I am a paediatrician and senior clinical advisor to a child development service in Perth. We have 19 centres and probably see around 100 000 appointments a year for speech pathology and a wide range of other services. I would like to support Dianna and other colleagues who have commented on the importance of early childhood development experiences. The early childhood development trajectory is very predictive of subsequent literacy outcomes within that setting. I have two main points to make. The first is that the importance of whatever changes to the curriculum or policies are endorsed, the notion of, in David's words "all children", or in the UK policy, "no child will be left behind", is the emphasis on each individual child. The curriculum needs to be flexible to the needs of the child. Whatever teaching or reading style is adapted by the teachers must be flexible; that is, it must not follow a set curriculum but adapt to the children's individual learning style. The notion of periodic reassessment is critical in the early years for children who are at risk of acquiring learning disabilities.

My second point is that within that context, it is sad that the child development service has been significantly underfunded for many years. Frankly, that is reflective that children are not highly valued citizens of our society. We need a significant cultural shift to adapt to and understand that children are our most precious asset and that they will occupy this chamber and be representative of their peers' needs in the future. In that setting, I indicate that there have been significant losses in the publicly funded child development services over the past few months. Lee will be disappointed

to learn that the speech pathologist at the Armadale Child Development Service has not been recontracted. I speak up in this forum to let it be known that things are rather desperate in this service and that it needs to be fitted into the broader agenda of literacy attainment. Thank you.

[7.30 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for that. Lee, do you want to comment on something in response?

Ms Lee Musumeci: No, I was probably just nodding in agreement.

Dr John Wray: Lee understands that around 25 per cent of children at Challis are on the waitlist at the Armadale Child Development Centre.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I just comment? I think with Ms Rig's comments, and bringing in the things that Lee, Mandy and Steve were saying, this is a very interesting thing. If we actually got the speech pathologists actively involved in the pedagogy, could we then not need so many children to go to speech pathology? That might be the way forward.

Ms Anne Stephens: The language development centres, of which we have a number throughout the metropolitan area, do have a program based on speech pathology included in the pedagogy. That program is being adopted in a number of other schools. For example, Midvale has taken on that program, and that can be introduced at any schools that are interested. They can go to their relevant districts to say that they want to have a program that is more informed by speech pathology and is doing the sorts of things that Steve and Mandy are talking about, and they can be easily introduced to a regular school program, and it probably will decrease the number of children at the pointy end.

Ms Mandy Nayton: We need to be involving other professional areas in informing early instruction, including speech pathology and psychology, and generally ensuring that what is happening in schools is the best possible practice. I do feel somehow, though, that one of the things that has happened in the past couple of decades is that teachers have been very disempowered, and looking outside for expert help partly because they themselves are not really skilled in a way that they need to be. I take the point we need to be adding this information in and ensuring that teachers get the information, resources and knowledge, but as Lee has demonstrated, once they have the knowledge and are doing the practice, it becomes less necessary to engage external help. We are taking away some of the knowledge from teachers rather than saying that the teachers are the experts. I think we should be saying that teachers are the literacy experts, and they need to be the ones delivering the programs and feeling confident about what they are doing and having the skills to do it.

Ms Louise Bourke: I am principal of the Kingsley Primary School in Armadale, which is on the opposite side of the tracks from Lee. I have been in education for 25 years in a range of settings from year 4 to secondary. In that time I had seen that the fundamental thing that makes a difference to a child improving its outcomes is the effectiveness of the person standing at the front of the room. If there is not an effective teacher, there are no effective learning outcomes. One of the biggest issues faced by teachers in my school and all over the state is the demands of a very overcrowded curriculum—they are required to report bi-annually—as well as the input from a range of people who all have a shared concern about what is needed by children. I agree with Mandy that teachers are feeling disempowered and are feeling overloaded and pressured to do what they want to do anyway. I did not get into education with the notion of seeing how many children I could help fail to read, and I do not know any teachers in my school or in my experience who have had that idea. But you have to be a social worker, a speech pathologist, a nurse and an occupational therapist, because the services are not available for you to bring into the school in the first place. The people we need to engage with are the teachers. They are the ones who will have to do this. They are the ones who need to do this. They have got to feel that they can do this, in whatever way that happens. At the moment, I am feeling like the Lorax—I speak for the trees. We need to engage

with the teachers, because if you have effective teachers who have effective programs you have children who learn what they need to learn.

The CHAIRMAN: I have a question from upstairs, from Margaret Anne Barker, a literacy teacher. Her question is directed to Mandy. She asks: would the explicit teaching of phonics be recommended for students in secondary schools, and how do we make it more engaging without seeming condescending?

Ms Mandy Nayton: That is a good question. Yes, absolutely, 100 per cent, but there is a difficulty in secondary school. I mentioned the schools that have been doing the individual assessments. In one school in particular one-third of the incoming year 8 children had reading ages below eight. They decided that was not going to be a very good future for those students, so they put those students in a very phonics-based explicit, systematic program. The kids came in for four sessions of half an hour a day. The phonics programs of the sort that we are talking about are fairly short, chunky programs every day. It is not as if you are suddenly spending the entire day drilling children. The year 8 students were involved in four sessions a week of 30 minutes a day. Initially they were a little resistant to it, as kids in year 8 are likely to be, because they saw it as a bit tedious and dull and not whizzbang, but by the beginning of term 2, on a follow-up form B assessment, all but three of the students had reading ages of above 11. They had made over three years' gain, apart from three of the students. Four of them were now reading at age-appropriate levels. That meant that suddenly a whole group of kids who could not engage with the secondary school curriculum at the beginning of year 8, could engage by the beginning of term 2. Those kids who were at year 8 level were then offered the opportunity to not be part of the program any more, because they were doing so well. They actually indicated that they would prefer to remain, because their goal was now that they wanted to be two years ahead of their peers, having spent their entire primary school years behind everybody else. They did not mind that it was kind of boring.

The CHAIRMAN: Who organised this program?

Ms Mandy Nayton: The school itself. The principal actually ran it—it is always the principal, is it not? The other staff were stretched, so the principal said “I will do it, four mornings a week”, and she did it. The point is that kids will very often start by being a bit resistant, but it is explained that some time in their early primary schooling they missed some vital bits of information, and they need to learn the stuff. Very often we make the mistake of trying to make things all too fuzzy, exciting and creative and we miss the point. Things are so embedded in there that the kids do not even notice that they are there, and they do not learn. Absolutely, whoever asked that question, yes.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: I am asking from a state of ignorance, more than anything. I understand systematic, but my mind is still trying to figure out synthetic phonics. Can I have an explanation please?

The CHAIRMAN: We all wanted to know that.

Ms Mandy Nayton: Basically, it is the most successful approach to teaching phonics, according to the research, and this was very strongly brought home by the Rose report in the evidence from practice. It is an approach that works from the sounds to the letters, rather than the other way around. It actually starts with sounds and synthesises sounds into words, so it is oral language based. You are moving from that position into synthesising letters into words. It is about teaching the reversibility of spelling and reading. If you want children to be good spellers they need to understand that reversibility. They need to be able to understand that you can blend letters together to read words, and that you need to be able to segment sounds—letters within words—in order to spell them.

The CHAIRMAN: I have another question from upstairs. This is from Dr Anna Alderson, who is an educational consultant. She directs her question to David Axworthy. Can he explain how the first-term NAPLAN preparation, published by the Department of Education and Training, which

does not take any account of children's individual needs, meets acknowledged early years pedagogy? Is that question clear?

Mr David Axworthy: Yes, I think so; it is clear to me. Let me explain for people who do not know what we are talking about with NAPLAN and first term. NAPLAN is the national assessment program for literacy and numeracy. Last year was the first year that Australia, in a sense, had the common railway gauge; the common measure. Before that time there was no single assessment device that was common across the various states and territories that all children sat. Last year the national assessment program in literacy and numeracy came into being. In May of last year children across the state and across every other state and territory, in government, independent and Catholic schools, and children who were being home tutored, in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sat a common set of tests that measured their ability in literacy and numeracy. In literacy, there was a test in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and there was a test in numeracy. The tests that were given in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 all linked to a common scale. For the first time, we will be able to see in the future how the children we are teaching are progressing along that scale as they move from year 3 to years 5, 7 and 9. Bear in mind that these tests are done on one particular day of the year, and it is only a very small snapshot of the child's total ability. However, they gave us for the first time the opportunity to see how our children, schools and teaching programs were going relative to everyone else in Australia.

As I said in my introduction, the results from that were quite disturbing for many of us in Western Australia because we saw that many of our children were not doing as well as we thought they were in comparison with children in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Interestingly, they were doing better than children in Queensland, on average. It is not the league table in and of itself that is a critical factor but it does raise some questions. The reason that many people have raised is that if there is no common curriculum across the whole Australia, how can there possibly be a common test, which is a fair call. We know that we are moving towards a common curriculum across Australia that will come into being in 2012. However, the things that were being tested in this national assessment plan were commonly taught across all the states and territories. In a sense, it was a fair deal.

What could we do? After we saw the results for Western Australia we were concerned that a large number of our children were not doing as well as we thought they should be doing. We wanted to do a couple of things. Firstly, we wanted to screen out the fact that some of our teachers were possibly not aware of those essential things that were being assessed. As the director general alluded to earlier, we started putting together a series of resources that made it absolutely clear to teachers what were regarded as the essential aspects of reading, writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar that were going to be assessed in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and we made those available. The question was, how does making that available, so that teachers knew exactly what was being assessed, fit with the early years pedagogy? Telling people what you want children to learn is the starting point for developing any pedagogy. You need to know what you are trying to teach, and then you set about looking at the best way of teaching it. I see no imbalance between those two things. We wanted to have intentional instruction, intentional teaching, explicit teaching—use whatever work you like—of the things we believe are essential and critical, not just so that we can bump our place up on a league table, but because people believe these things are the essential components—the building blocks, if you like—for children. We thought that making those explicit and showing people what they were was an essential component. It was not a matter of—I think Mandy used this term—fuzzing it up, or leaving things fuzzy. We did not want to do that, so we have made it explicit, and people can see exactly what children are going to be assessed on and they can see how that relates to their own teaching programs and make the necessary adjustments if they need to. I believe we need, in our early years, wherever we put it, to be explicit about it and I would want every teacher to know what they wanted their children to learn, and to set about teaching those

children in an intentional way, bearing in mind, as the gentleman up here said, that children are different and no one style will meet all children's needs, but to reflect on what they are trying to do.

The CHAIRMAN: David, while you are on your feet, could you pick up the point that Lee was making about the curriculum? We have had a look at the curriculum for early years literacy, and it seems very broad—more about what to teach rather than how to teach it. Do you think there is a point, listening to the comments about the science from the speech pathologists and others, that there is some science about the best way to teach? Do you think there is a role for the Department of Education and Training to have a more explicit curriculum, so that there will be less fuzz around this issue?

Mr David Axworthy: I do not want to finesse the issue. I want to be really clear. There is a big difference between what needs to be taught and how you go about teaching it. We need to be quite explicit and quite definite about what needs to be taught, and what children need to learn. It needs to come down to the level of specificity—I believe it exists in our curriculum material—of which sounds they need to know and how to blend the CVC, and the scope and sequence of when you do that. You need to be able to do this before you do that. That needs to be very explicit. Whether it is taught in a particular teaching style will depend on the children and what they have already mastered, and what works for the children. The teacher needs to have a bit of flex in his capacity.

The CHAIRMAN: But you agree that teachers need a bit more guidance.

Mr David Axworthy: I believe the guidance is there, but I also believe that we can provide more professional opportunities for teachers to learn. We need to have teachers who come out on to the golf course with a set of golf clubs and know how to use them, rather than just equipping them with a driver, because sometimes they will be on the green. I know it is a crass analogy, but I firmly believe that.

Ms Susie Leitao: I am a speech pathologist and educator from Curtin University. I want to say how heartened I am to see a room full of speech pathologists, teachers, psychologists, parents, doctors and occupational therapists who are all so passionate about our children and about the teaching of literacy, and who want to work together and collaborate. That is a fantastic thing for Western Australia.

Mr Cris Partington: I am the principal of Bletchley Park Primary School in Southern River. Before that, I spent seven and a half years at Willandra Primary School in Armadale, a neighbouring school to that of Ms Musumeci. The Department of Education and Training has it all there. There is the Literacy Net. You go back to the reports. You go back to the Rowe report and the Loudon report. It talks about putting highly trained experts in schools. That was there, but it has been watered down for a number of reasons, the teacher shortage being one, but it is all there. Literacy Net is the basis—that is the net that catches the kids—and First Steps is there to pick up. It teaches the teachers how to teach. It is there, but it is just not consistently used across the state, and I think it needs to be. At Willandra, we went back to Literacy Net and we went back to First Steps and we picked up national recognition for the programs that we were running at the school. That was for numeracy as well. It is all there.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Lee, you gave evidence about the curriculum that you developed in your school because you are concerned that you needed something very specific. Could you just go into a little more detail on that?

Ms Lee Musumeci: That was before the department published its scoping sequence statements in the phases of learning. For our school, we needed to be a little more specific, so we have broken ours down into kindergarten, pre-primary, year 1 and year 2, right down to the order and sequence in which the sounds need to be introduced. Each and every one of our teachers has been trained by Diana Rig. We all attend her workshops. All of our education assistants attend Diana's workshops.

We purchase all of her resources, and our curriculum very strongly reflects what they are taught by her.

Dr Steve Heath: In reply to Mr Partington, that is not my take on it. I just cannot see the detail and the scope and sequencing that is needed to equip teachers whom I am in touch with, to teach structured synthetic phonics. I do not see it in those documents.

Mr Cris Partington: I was being very simplistic in saying that it is all there. It is all there, but there is a lot of talk about what all the checkpoints meant. We spent a lot of time talking about what we are doing. The literacy expert, the Getting It Right expert there, who was a highly trained literacy person, worked shoulder to shoulder with the teachers. Sending teachers off to professional development is fine, but I have been to plenty of professional development courses and I have come back and done nothing with it. In the Getting It Right program, a highly trained experts is there every day working with the teachers. It is not working with the kids; it is about empowering teachers.

The CHAIRMAN: We had some evidence on Getting It Right and First Steps. Who gave us evidence on that?

Ms Mandy Nayton: I will comment about the First Steps program. It is a bit dangerous to talk about First Steps in Western Australia, because it is held up as the Holy Grail. It is a great program and has a lot of very good strategies in it, but I do not think it is detailed enough. I also think that, particularly in some of the strategies for encouraging children to read, it is directly opposed to some of what the research evidence tells us about how best to teach children to read. I would be very cautious about the interpretation of some of that material.

The CHAIRMAN: Everyone has been very patient. I know some people are going, so we will wrap it up at about eight o'clock, if that is okay. That gives us room for a couple more questions.

Ms Robyn Garbutt: I am a qualified early childhood educator. Most of my knowledge comes from 25 years working in early childhood; that is zero to six years of age, before year 1, with thousands of children, through observation and involvement. I believe that reading relates to learning. For that to occur you need memory and lots of reading and repetition. You need to have a love of learning, which comes from listening. That is encouragement. This starts with parents as the significant other, and then the early childhood teachers, focusing on behaviours, environment—quiet and supporting—and the significant other. I believe that reading should start at three months, as soon as the child's eyesight can focus on pictures. Parents should have access to a program, probably through the library system, of showing children how to love books, by seating them correctly, using their voices to make it interesting, pointing to pictures, asking questions about the pictures. There was a program in the libraries about two or three years ago, but it was a bit complicated for most parents to go along and participate in. It could be much simpler. I believe that some of the comments made here are correct. Play-based learning is through using teaching skills. It is not just unsupervised play; it is actually involved teaching with the play. I agree with Mandy when she says that Fraser Mustard's studies show that the significance of early childhood has an impact forever after. I agree that oral language is the primary teacher. That is where it all starts. Unfortunately, in a country like Australia, we have some disadvantaged children, and special cases with immigrant children, especially in a culture that does not get involved, such as, in my experience, Burmese. I also agree that the State Child Development Centre does a marvellous job. Our staff are not called teachers in early childhood centres; they are called educators and assistants. I believe that they can identify speech delays—we are talking about the oral control—very early on; long before the children get to kindergarten and pre-primary. We look at them about age two and a half, and around the age of three we get concerned. There seems to be a lot of speech delays. I do not know whether there are more, or whether we are just identifying them better. There is a huge place for speech therapists and pathologists to get in early. We are very fortunate in the early childhood centres to have almost immediate access through the Department for Child Protection to have assessments

done on children we are concerned about, and then to have access to speech pathologists. It is quicker if they have private health insurance, of course. It is a real shame that the State Child Development Centre does not get enough funding, because there are huge delays in getting assessments done with children. However, the results are obvious. When they get the early intervention, and the staff and parents are all involved with the experts, the results are there. Children can actually be brought up to scratch it very quickly—within a year or two, before they go to school.

In Victoria, some years ago—I am not sure if it is still on—the government paid for teachers to go into early childhood centres so that kindergarten and pre-primary aged children had a qualified teacher. That is important. The TAFE training is good, but I think that for pre-primary children at least, it would be good to have the Department of Education and Training fund the teachers in that age group. It is not possible for the centres to absorb those costs.

The CHAIRMAN: we will have to wrap it up fairly quickly, thank you very much.

Mr Cal Durrant: I hold the chair of initial education at Murdoch University. We have heard a number of imperatives for teacher education this evening, and I am glad because at the moment we are going through a review of our programs at Murdoch in early childhood, primary and secondary education. I must confess that I am a little bit alarmed because it would appear from what we have heard tonight that our teachers are going to have to become experts in psychology, speech pathology, paediatrics, sociology et cetera. While I am very proud of our Murdoch graduates, I am not certain that many of us would feel comfortable about first-year teachers making assessments in those particular areas. However, my question is this: given those kinds of imperatives that you have addressed this evening, what would we need to drop from a very crowded curriculum to bring in those sorts of areas? Would we need to cut back on curriculum areas to boost these others areas? Would it be Indigenous education or inclusive education?

[8.00 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: Could you just clarify something? Has someone put forward the proposition that you need to introduce psychology?

Mr Cal Durrant: No, I am just saying that it has been suggested this evening that our teachers should be expert in those areas. From a crowded curriculum viewpoint at a university level, there is not the space as it currently stands. David and Sharyn may be alarmed to know that if they wanted our students to be experts in all those fields, it will probably be another 15 years before we get first year teachers out. I would be delighted to learn what areas we should perhaps cut back on.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: I would like to make a quick comment. Listening to both Mandy and Lee tonight and some of the other people and the responses to Mandy's and Lee's presentations and the answers that they gave to questions, it seems to me that we are asking our universities, educators and teachers to take it back to basics; take it back to where we are teaching our teachers to teach reading, literacy and numeracy. Other people should be taking care of a lot of the extra stuff that you think you now have to introduce, such as psychology, social skills and those sorts of things. We need them to teach. That is what is coming back to us tonight. Our teachers want to be able to teach and we need our universities to teach our first-year graduates to teach right at the very start, not getting to all the other side issues.

Ms Lee Musumeci: The director general has made it very clear to all schools that she expects us to get rid of the clutter within our schools—get rid of the cluttered curriculum as it currently stands. We have been given very clear information about what is important for our kids. My school planning is based around literacy, numeracy and the development of social and emotional wellbeing. Everything else is catered for in an integrated manner. That is a very vague way of saying that we are placing all of our importance on literacy, numeracy and social and emotional wellbeing.

In response to the question about what to drop, maybe if university training reflects the direction that our department is giving to us, if you focus on teaching the teachers how to teach reading, that would be a very good start.

Ms Gemma Boyle: I am a psychologist, one of the other professionals in the room. I wanted to respond to what Mr Durrant was saying about the curriculum. What is our priority here? We can talk about all these other subject areas but how will kids engage with any of that if their literacy skills are not good enough? We need to focus on going back to the basics, understanding those key component skills, so that students can access the whole curriculum. They will not be able to do that if they are 15 years old and not able to read and write at a functional level.

The CHAIRMAN: Just to put some clarity around it, when there was a discussion about involving speech pathologists, it was about ensuring that the people training our teachers have the pedagogy that works, that we have a pedagogy that is based on an understanding of language development and practical experience about what does bring home the bacon. It is about using the theory and combining that with practical experience.

Ms Susan Ashcroft: I am from the State Library of Western Australia. I wanted to make one final comment. We have heard a lot about getting it right after children start school. We have spent very little time talking about programs and getting it right before they start school.

The CHAIRMAN: I possibly did not make that clear enough at the beginning. I said that our committee has been working on that for the past year. Incidentally, we came across this issue that seemed to suggest that it is not only about what happens in the zero to 4 years but it is also about how you teach once those children get there. Some of the information that has come out tonight indicates that even if children presented at a school with great developmental vulnerability, if you teach them in a particular style, you have a much greater chance of addressing that. That is specifically what this forum was about tonight. The art of politics and the art of government is trying to put some boundaries around saying what are the things that we can make some progress on. Tonight we were trying to deal with that very confined issue. All of our committee is very much of the view that more has to be done in those first years but that does not mean that we should not be actively engaging in this issue of what is the best way to teach these kids regardless of the level of vulnerability that they present us with.

I want to thank all our panellists for coming here tonight. I realise that you have put a lot of effort into this and you are all passionate believers in the work that you do. I also want to thank everyone who has come along to participate in this forum. I am really sorry that we have not been able to have as much dialogue as we would have liked. We have all of your questions, and we will look at those. We all agree that we want to make sure that every child in this state has a place in the sun. We have to understand what the science is telling us and what the practical experience is telling us about how we do it. We all want the same outcome but we have to become focused on what will deliver that outcome. Thank you all very much for coming along tonight. I hope you found it as rewarding as we did.

Forum concluded at 8.07 pm